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ABSTRACT

This document discusses classroom discipline and the teacher's role in promoting student understanding of the democratic process and respect for structure in social groups. Definitions of discipline include punishment, school regulations, and classroom rules enforced by the teacher as a reasonable authority. In explaining the need for rules and limits in the classroom, the author points out that laws preserve some measure of freedom for everyone while, at the same time, limiting certain behaviors. In guiding the structuring of rules and social controls in the classroom, the teacher must be responsive to students' developmental capabilities. This is especially important in elementary grades when children begin to perceive themselves as significant members of a group. Teachers must apply authority effectively in establishing discipline and should manage conflict resolution in ways that become learning experiences in order to strengthen collective social responsibility. Nine steps are presented to help teachers establish order and build student self-discipline. (Author/AV)

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Teaching Self-Discipline: Democratizing the Classroom Through Law-Related Education

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Discipline issues are as old as the search for freedom, and today they are central to the schooling experiences of the nation's children. Hickory sticks marked the bottoms of many youngsters, but the problems persisted and grow even more stressful and worrisome today.

How and why we discipline children matter a great deal. To the child, discipline has a complex range of meanings, some of which we can only crudely guess at. And in the social context of the school or classroom, discipline has the added significance of being perceived by authorities as a key strategy in developing/shaping behavior, assumedly, democratic behaviors.

Viewed from the perspective of law-related education, we can examine discipline in the context of two key concepts long familiar to the role of teachers and to programs for young children, authority and responsibility. The dynamics of disciplinary action then fall into a larger context with clear implications for democratizing the schools.

Before coming to Boston two years ago, I was an assistant principle in an elementary school in a suburban New York community. In house, as far as the teachers and children were concerned, I was the "disciplinarian", and so, one might reasonably assume, I knew a lot about how to achieve and maintain class-school order. Truth is, dealing with discipline involves a continuous learning, an interplay between knowledge, values and attitudes about self, children and the democratic experience.

I gradually began to recognize the limitations of "law and order" principles and began to reflect on the interrelatedness of self-discipline, authority and responsibility. My perceptions shifted as I began to think more about the context

for disciplining and the meaning of discipline to the children in their confrontation with authority. Two generalizations emerged: 1) these encounters vibrated with socially relevant messages about the way a school - the system - the deomcratic system - works, and more importantly, 2) the interpersonal encounter that is mobilized by discipline issues has an underlying moral quality and ultimate potentiality, not as a means for restricting and controlling, but as a learning process intrinsic to the development of democratic behaviors and values.

This article is an attempt to elaborate on these observations and provide some direction for channeling disciplinary episodes toward purposive, democratically oriented behavior.

Discipline problems seem to plague our schools. The Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency recently reported that even in affluent suburbs, attacks on students and teachers were increasing, and that in 1975-76 property damage - ranging from graffiti to theft - cost 600 million dollars - more than was spent on textbooks during that academic year.

Discipline is a concern to educators in all our schools and I think there is a great deal we can do to help ourselves and our students in this critical area.

The term "discipline" has many applications. To some it suggests punishment. To others, it is a value system represented by regulations, dress code, straight lines in the corridors. These behaviors tend to be adult defined and students are expected to be submissive and docilely adhere or bear the consequences of disciplinary action.

A third view that is also value-oriented, actively engages students in re-

cognizing the appropriateness of reasonable authority and the clear need for rules in a democratically oriented classroom - as part of the student's growing awareness and understanding of democratic principles and ideals. It is a rationally based viewpoint that promotes mutual respect and an obligation to work within the parameters of reasonably established rules, limits and school regulations. It is an approach that recognizes the developmental capabilities of children and the legitimacy of the teacher as the natural, supportive authority in the classroom.

Let's explore three interrelated aspects of this viewpoint with the hope that we can clarify some of these essentials of achieving and maintaining discipline in the context of citizenship or law-related education. First, let's examine the need for rules and limits in the classroom in terms of our own lifespace as adults in the constitutional democractic society of ours.

If we could take a "mindwalk" together, we would readily recognize the many laws that govern our life experiences, laws that govern our names, our children, places of residence, breakfast foods, children's school attendance, ownership, operation and maintenance of our cars. In this consciousness raising process we would quickly become more aware of our law-saturated society. If we stop to reason about why we have these rules, we'd find that fundamentally they deal with our basic rights and responsibilities as citizens. They are laws that invariably illustrate the relationship between individuals and groups of individuals. They are laws that safeguard freedom's values. They protect individuals. And, as laws limit and regulate individuals, laws also preserve some measure of freedom for everyone. And it is very important to recognize that it is part of our responsible role as citizens to be informed of the rules and regulations, and to participate

either directly or through an elected representative in decisions that support and promote our laws. It is also important for us to recognize the consequences of breaking the law - i.e., speeding tickets.

I think that we would all agree that a certain predictable compliance with the law is necessary, indeed, essential for social order. Schools too, as social institutions, develop - over a period of time - a set of functional, constitutionally oriented rules and norms for both adults and children, and the classroom, though a smaller social unit, develops what I think of as a mini-legal system with it's own set of rules, boundaries and limits. What and how these rules and behaviors are developed and set into the ongoing life of the classroom is a critical process in determining the actions and developing attitudes of the group of youngsters. The key person in guiding this process of social organization and order in the classroom is the teacher as the adult and natural authroity. It is the teacher who must work together with students in developing a fair process for class governance and an awareness and respect for control and order.

In guiding the structuring of rules and social controls in the classroom, the teacher also needs to be responsive to the developmental capabilities of the students - the second element in developing discipline.

Particularly in the vulnerable early elementary years, the teacher plays a critical role as the authority person helping the child to make the transition from family life and the incidental group experiences of neighborhood play groups to a new kind of collective group where membership is influenced by the child's performance and the teachers attitudes. It's in this setting that the child develops a sense of self-worth as an effective, significant participant, a group member who experiences the mutual respect of authorities and peers, regardless

of his ethnic group, economic status or level of competencies.

Principles of child development provide the basis for selection of appropriate subject matter and teaching strategies responsive to the student's dynamic range of developmental needs and capabilities.

Piaget offers a framework in suggesting that the child has an absorbing egocentric character until six or seven years of age, behavior exemplified by limited ability to think about another's point of view, or for that matter, the needs and rights of a group of children. That's why a youngster is so likely to "break" the rules, for though he may "know" what the rules are, he is unlikely to follow anything but the simplest rule. Unilateral, authoritarian adult behavior at this stage tends to stimulate fear and promote dependency.

Piaget proposes an alternative response to authoritarian adult behavior that acknowledges the importance of interpersonal experiences in learning. According to Piaget, in expressing respect toward the child, the supportive adult authority encourages the child to feel obligated to the person whom he respects, stimulating attitudes and relationships that are more reciprocal and cooperative, an important dimension of self-discipline and reciprocity. Democratic principles and ideals at this stage begin to have some real meaning for everyone involved. Thinking and reasoning about the need for rules, about fairness and justice and effective processes for school governance become more than a cognitive task. They begin to actively relate to real experiences and real life situations.

And so we've come to consider the third element or interrelated aspect of this viewpoint of discipline - <u>the teacher in the authority role</u>.

The aftermath of Vietnam and Watergate provides a partial explanation for the "crisis of authority" we face today. The authority role seems to be condemned for being either arch-conservative or excessively permissive. Contemporary critics

of the schools project authority figures in an onerous role, referring to those who would limit incentive and creativity. Images of authoritarian teachers are projected that are strict, cool, detached, punitive people who wield power forcefully and promote submissive and passive student behavior. In this context there is an inevitability of authority as essentially conservative and a part of the armor of control of the establishment.

Neither the "free to do your own thing" nor the power wielding stance of authority is suited to preparing students to respect the need for rules and feel obliged to follow them. Neither approach prepares students to participate in democracy.

And yet, authority is always a function of concrete human situations. It is present in the operating relationship between students and the teacher who mediates conduct. Authority is the basic condition for the helping/teaching relationship. Seeking an effective application of authority in the helping/teaching relationship is a critical point in establishing discipline.

What about your role as the natural teaching authority?

There are several premises that I would set forth for you to consider as you reflect on your own role as the natural teaching authority.

1. Children and adults are social beings and our main desire is to belong - to be a part of the group.
2. Our behavior is purposive and is part of our effort to belong. Misbehavior is a cue that indicates either that the person has misinformation about the rules or confused ideas about how to be a significant member of the group. Indeed, he may feel or actually be rejected be-

cause of his abilities, or ethnic or racial identity.

3. In order to create a climate of respect, people's values need to be pretty much together in terms of what they want for children. For example, self-worth, self-discipline, a growing sense of obligation and responsibility to one's self, and to the social unit are crucial aspects of social interrelationships.

4. Conflict simply is a reality in contemporary life and our educational institutions must make constructive use of conflict episodes in the learning process. Teachers will need to manage environments in which order and conflict resolution become learning experiences that strengthen collective social responsibility.

5. Programs need a high degree of focus on relevance. OPEN discussion and active participation is fundamental to the learning process. Helping students recognize the need for a calm and orderly working environment is essential if learning is to proceed.

What Positive Steps Can a Teacher Take to Establish Order and Help Children Build Self-Discipline?

- Recognize the interrelatedness between issues of student discipline, your role as the natural authority, and group responsibilities.

- Take every opportunity to model democratic behavior through words and actions.

- Be consistent, follow through on rules you and the group have established.

- Focus the processes of learning self-discipline on the everyday events of the classroom by recognizing that issues of fairness, sharing, abuse, power, rights

and responsibilties of individuals and groups are a valid basis for learning for social growth and understanding.

- Develop skills in structuring OPEN group discussion, "buzz" sessions, or class meetings. They are excellent formats for increasing social awareness and as an instructional activity, should be part of the built-in structure of the school day.

- Help your students to engage in open discussion; 1) discussions in which facts and issues can be openly aired, 2) discussions in which listening is encouraged and support is provided by the adult authority for all parties, 3) discussions in which there is a common commitment to act in mutually respectful ways as members of the school community. Children need to be helped to actively listen. It is an important social skill that can lead toward social competency and self-discipline.

- HELP STUDENTS TO THINK, TO QUESTION, AND TO REASON about the need for classroom rules in democratically oriented schools.

- Be clear in your own minds about the differences between authoritarian and authoritative. There is a definite need for authoritative teachers who will exercise appropriate influence and authority and, at the same time not turn away from the imperative to understand the needs and feelings of the students.

- And finally, in your growing confidence as teaching authorities, begin to work within your schools with your colleagues toward increasing understanding about discipline and contributing to the democratization of your school.